DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 115 576 SO 008 812

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TITLE A Content Analysis of the Treatment of Black Americans on Television.
PUB DATE [75]
NOTE 18p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Bias; *Commercial Television; Cultural Images; Ethnic Groups; Ethnic Stereotypes; Negro Attitudes; Negro Culture; Negro Role; *Negro Stereotypes; *Programing (Broadcast); *Racial Discrimination; Scripts; Television Research; Television Viewing

ABSTRACT

The relationship between the racial composition of television casts and their portrayal of Black Americans is examined. Observations of six selected television programs over several weeks indicated that the portrayal of Black in integrated and all-Black programs communicates different images about Black Americans. The results indicate that Black characters in all-Black television casts display a significantly greater number of stereotypic Black characteristics, more personal and family problems, and tend to have low social status. Black characters in integrated television casts display a significantly greater number of socially valued characteristics, community problems, and high social status symbols. The study raises questions on the effects of these two types of portrayals on children's racial attitudes and self-concepts. The all-Black programs which contain negative elements that are traditionally associated with Black Americans may reinforce or instill stereotypic images of Blacks in the viewer. The programs with integrated casts may reinforce the notion that Black people are highly assimilated, upward mobile members of society. (Author/DE)

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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE TREATMENT OF BLACK AMERICANS ON TELEVISION

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Introduction

The treatment of Black Americans in the visual media has received much attention in recent years. Black films produced in the early 1970s, such as Superfly and The Mack, have been severely criticized by Black scholars and leaders. Many Black leaders claim that Afro-Americans are negatively and insensitively portrayed in the visual media (Fife, 1974).

Television programs featuring Black Americans have also been widely criticized for their portrayal of Black life and culture. Brown (1971) claims that Flip Wilson's success on television was due primarily to his substantiation of a racist view of Blacks. Gillespie (1974) contends that several of the television programs of the 1974 season that featured Black characters resurrected "Amos and Andy." She also argues that these programs use "old stereotypes" and make a "mockery of us all." The arguments set forth by Brown and Gillespie reflect the general tone of many of the observations that are currently being made about the portrayal of Black Americans on television. Many Black scholars and commentators feel that television does not portray Black Americans accurately and that it reinforces stereotypic views of Blacks.

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The perceptions of the treatment of Black Americans reviewed above are pervasive within the Black community. These perceptions are important both because of their nature and pervasiveness. Since television is a cogent factor in our lives, the treatment of Afro-Americans on television merits scientific study. The scientific study of the treatment of Afro-Americans on television can help us to determine whether many pervasive beliefs about the portrayal of Blacks on television are supported by scientific evidence and give us some clues about the possible effects which television might have on the development of racial attitudes and beliefs.

The scientific study of the treatment of Afro-Americans on television is especially important because children develop negative attitudes toward Blacks at an early age (Goodman, 1964 and Morland, 1971). Some evidence suggests that communication content influences racial attitudes (Cooper, Dinerman, 1951; Peterson, Thurstone, 1933). It has been well documented that television is an important factor in the lives of children (Leifer, 1974). Children aged three to sixteen spend more time watching television than they do in school. One-sixth of their waking day is spent watching television (Lang & Lang, 1953). Evidence suggests that television can influence the viewer's general knowledge, cultural tastes, and a number of other important aspects of his or her life (Schramm, 1961). In addition, much of the learning that occurs when individuals watch television is incidental and unplanned. A person watching television for entertainment accumulates items of knowledge without consciously seeking them out (Schramm, 1961). The findings of this study identify some of the types of knowledge which television viewers are possibly learning about Blacks.

Purpose of the Study

This study was designed to determine whether there was a relationship between the racial composition of television casts and their portrayal of Black

Americans. A comparison of those television programs with integrated casts and those with all-Black casts was made.

Many dimensions of the portrayal of Black Americans on television can be fruitfully studied. However, this investigator chose to study the portrayal of Blacks on integrated and all-Black programs because preliminary observations of selected television programs over a period of several weeks suggested that those two types of television programs communicated different images about Black Americans and in some ways reflected general societal attitudes about Blacks in segregated and in integrated settings.

Within our society, Blacks who are highly culturally assimilated are usually the ones with high economic and social mobility. Consequently, they tend to be judged more favorably by the larger society than less assimilated Blacks (Gordon, 1964). Highly assimilated Blacks are more likely to participate in racially integrated settings than less assimilated Blacks. Blacks who confine most of their social activities to their ethnic community are usually lower on the economic and social ladder and are usually less culturally assimilated than Blacks who participate frequently within the larger society. Blacks who are the least assimilated are more likely to be judged negatively by the larger society than those highly assimilated Blacks who are highly integrated into White society. Gordon's theory of cultural assimilation served as the basis for the formulation and explanation of the hypotheses. The study was designed, in part, to determine whether television's images of Blacks in segregated and integrated settings were consistent with those held in the wider society and those which reflect social theory and research.

Hypotheses

Eight hypotheses were tested in this study. They assert specific relationships between the racial composition of television casts and the portrayal

of Black Americans. The hypotheses are based on research related to television and race relations and a pretest of twenty television programs (DeFleur, 1964; Leifer, 1974; Brink and Harris, 1964). The hypotheses are:

1. Stereotypic Black characteristic theme units have a higher frequency on all-Black television programs than in integrated television programs.

2. Stereotypic Anglo-American characteristic theme units (as displayed by Black cast members) have a higher frequency on integrated programs than in all-Black programs.

3. Low social status theme units have a higher frequency in all-Black television programs than on integrated television programs.

4. High social status theme units have a higher frequency in integrated television programs than in all-Black television programs.

5. Socially valued characteristic theme units have a higher frequency in integrated programs than in all-Black television programs.

6. Community problem theme units have a higher frequency in integrated television programs than in all-Black television programs.

7. Personal problem theme units have a greater frequency in all-Black television programs than in integrated television programs.

8. Black awareness theme units have a greater frequency in all-Black television programs than in integrated television programs.

Method

The research method used in this study was content analysis. Content analysis is a technique that allows the objective, systematic, and quantitative analysis of communication material. The extensive work done by Berelson and Budd et al. in content analysis was used as a basis for this study (Berelson, 1971; Budd et al., 1967).

There are several possible research units in content analysis. These include characters, ideas, and themes. The theme was the research unit used in this study. A theme is an assertion about a particular subject. Eight theme categories and fifty-three theme units were used in this study. The theme categories represent broad compartments into which the theme units fit. The theme categories were the organizing elements of the study. They also represent one of the delimitations of the study. Only data relevant to the eight theme categories was collected. The theme categories and units were not exhaustive. However, each theme category and unit explored important dimensions of the research question and represented salient aspects of the programs. The theme categories were derived from a pretest of a sample of the programs included in the study. In addition, research and literature related to race relations was used in formulating the theme categories and units (Brink, Harris, 1964; Campbell, Schuman, 1970). Table 1 includes the eight theme categories. Eight of the fifty-three theme units used in this study are presented as examples.

The theme categories and units were incorporated into a coding sheet, hereafter called the instrument. The instrument provided spaces for checking the presence or the absence of each theme unit. It also contained space for recording other identifying information about the programs.

Table 1

RESEARCH THEME CATEGORIES
AND SAMPLE THEME UNITS

Theme Categories	Theme Units
Stereotypic Black Characteristics	Character is happy and fun-loving.
Stereotypic Anglo-American Characteristics	Character speaks standard English.
Low Social Status	Character has a blue collar job.
High Social Status	Character has a minimum education equal to a college degree.
Socially Valued Characteristics	Character displays cooperation
Community Problems	Character has problems that require public agencies to solve.
Personal and Family Problems	Character has marital problems.
Black Awareness	Character indicates knowledge of Black history.

Sample

The programs included in the study had the following characteristics:

1. Programs on the three major commercial networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS)
2. Programs that are characterized as series
3. Programs broadcasted Sunday through Saturday from 7:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m.
4. Programs broadcasted between October 30, 1974 and November 22, 1974
5. Programs with Black actors who appeared weekly.

The programs meeting the above criteria were:

"Mannix"

"Good Times"

"That's My Mama"

"Get Christie Love"

"Ironside"

"Sanford and Son"

Reliability

A variation of the equivalent forms method was used to establish reliability. Three trained coders coded the same television programs and the results were compared. Agreement of .69 was established for all programs coded. This reliability figure was determined using the formula $R = \frac{3(C_1, C_2, C_3)}{C_1 + C_2 + C_3}$ (Budd, 1967). A specific level of acceptable reliability has not been established for this type of study. However, thematic analysis frequently results in a comparatively low reliability (Berelson, 1971).

Validity

Traditionally, validity has not played an important role in content analysis. Face validity was often assumed by researchers using this method (Budd, 1967). Face validity assumes that it is self-evident that the researcher is measuring what he purports to be measuring. Validity is important and attention was given to it in this study.

Validity was determined by the jury method. Four jurors were asked to independently judge the suitability of the theme category definitions. All jurors agreed that the theme definitions correlated with the theme categories. The jurors were then asked to pair the eight theme categories with the appropriate fifty-six theme units. Four theme units were discarded because there was less than 75 percent agreement on their appropriate theme category. There was 100 percent agreement on the placement of thirty-one theme units and 75 percent agreement on the placement of twenty-one theme units.

Analysis

The results of the study are based on the coding of six television programs by three coders. A theme unit was noted as present on a television program if 100 percent of the coders marked the theme unit present on their instruments. Table 2 contains the total theme unit frequency for each theme category.

Table 2

TOTAL THEME UNIT FREQUENCY
BY THEME CATEGORY

Theme Category	Theme Unit Frequency
Stereotypic Black Characteristics	36
Stereotypic Anglo-American Characteristics	17
Low Social Status	34
High Social Status	23
Socially Valued Characteristics	33
Community Problems	15
Personal and Family Problems	13
Black Awareness	17

The X^2 one sample test was used to determine whether a significant difference existed between the observed number of theme units noted by the coders and the expected number based on the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis was tested with the following formula:

$$X^2 = \sum_{i=1}^{K} \frac{(O_i - E_i)^2}{E_i}$$

(Siegal, 1956, p. 46). The null hypothesis was rejected at $\alpha = .05$. The X^2 values and corresponding significance levels for each hypothesis are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

CHI SQUARE VALUES CALCULATED ON TELEVISION PROGRAMS WITH ALL-BLACK CASTS COMPARED TO PROGRAMS WITH INTEGRATED CASTS

	Hypotheses							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
X^2 Value	28.44	.52	34	12.56	6.82	8.06	13	2.88
df	1	1	1	1	1		1	1
Significance Level	.001	NS	.001	.001	.01>.001	.01>.001	.001	NS

Findings

Hypothesis 1: There is a greater frequency of stereotypic Black characteristic theme units on programs with all-Black casts than on programs with integrated casts.

Hypothesis 2: There is no difference in the frequency of stereotypic Anglo-American characteristic theme units on programs with all-Black and integrated casts.

Hypothesis 3: Low social status theme units have a greater frequency on programs with all-Black casts than on programs with integrated casts.

Hypothesis 4: There is a greater frequency of high social status theme units on programs with integrated casts than on programs with all-Black casts.

Hypothesis 5: There is a greater frequency of socially valued characteristic theme units on programs with integrated casts than on programs with all-Black casts.

Hypothesis 6: There is a greater frequency of community problem theme units on programs with integrated casts than on programs with all-Black casts.

Hypothesis 7: There is a greater frequency of personal problem theme units on programs with all-Black casts than on programs with integrated casts.

Hypothesis 8: There is no difference in the frequency of Black awareness theme units in programs with all-Black casts and in programs with integrated casts. However, it should be noted that the data is in the direction of the hypothesis.

In summary, the data indicate a relationship between the integration and nonintegration of television casts and the portrayal of Black Americans. Black characters in all-Black television casts displayed a significantly greater number of stereotypic Black characteristics, more personal and family

problems, and tended to have low social status. Black characters in integrated television casts displayed a significantly greater number of socially valued characteristics, community problems, and high social status symbols.

The data did not confirm the relationship between integrated casts and Anglo-American characteristics, nor did it confirm the relationship between all-Black casts and Black awareness. This could indicate that Blacks, regardless of the type of television cast, are portrayed with a degree of both characteristics. A more definitive answer might be revealed in future research in which the theme categories and units as well as the sample are enlarged.

Conclusion

The data collected in this study identify specific characteristics that are associated with the portrayal of Black Americans on programs with integrated and all-Black casts. These characteristics are generally consistent with society's view of Blacks in segregated and in integrated settings. The data seem to indicate two contrasting portrayals of Black Americans on television: a traditional portrayal and a somewhat novel portrayal. The traditional portrayal is identified by negative stereotyping of Afro-Americans. This portrayal was frequently found on programs with all-Black casts. An example of this type of portrayal is the hip playboy, Earl, on "That's My Mamma." The novel portrayal of Blacks is identified by positive stereotyping normally associated with white characters. This type of portrayal was frequently found on programs with integrated casts. An example of this type of stereotyping was found on "Mannix." Gail, who is highly assimilated, efficiently and responsibly handles a tough white collar job.

This study raises the question of the effects of traditional and novel portrayals of Blacks on the racial attitudes and self-concepts of children and youths. The specific nature of this relationship is not presented in this study.

However, the research presented in this study does provide the basis for a speculative discussion of this question.

The all-Black programs contain a number of negative elements that are traditionally associated with Afro-Americans. These elements may reinforce and/or instill stereotypic images of Blacks in the viewer. Research indicates that stereotypic views of Blacks still exist within American society (Ehrlich, 1962). Research also indicates that prejudiced children are more likely than nonprejudiced children to make unwarranted conclusions, deal poorly with ambiguous problems, and are less likely to show insight and understanding (Kutner, 1958). This study raises serious questions about the effects of prejudiced children and youths seeing Blacks negatively stereotyped on television. Prejudiced children might be unable to accurately differentiate between the image of Blacks they see on television and the wide variety of Afro-Americans which they might come in contact with.

Negative stereotyping of Blacks may have an especially negative impact on Black children and youths. Some of the images of Blacks portrayed on television may reinforce or instill a negative value for Blackness. After seeing Blacks traditionally portrayed on television, Black viewers may well conclude that to be Black means that one is poor, carefree, and unschooled. Less assimilated Blacks who have had little contact with highly assimilated Blacks are likely to accept this kind of image of Afro-Americans.

The programs with integrated casts may reinforce the notion that Black people are highly assimilated upward mobile members of society. These programs portray Blacks with a variety of positive characteristics, such as competency and bravery. Blacks are portrayed as being very much like middle class White Americans. This image of Blacks might cause whites to view Blacks as less threatening and as important and productive members of society (Gordon,

1964). Black characters on these types of shows may be presenting images of Black Americans with which whites can identify and understand. The portrayal of Blacks on integrated programs may positively affect the self-concepts of Blacks. Seeing Blacks leading successful professional and personal lives may inspire Black children to high life goals and instill pride in being Black.

We are unaware of the totality of the messages that are being communicated by television about Black Americans nor do we know their full impact on the viewer. Further research is needed to determine whether television programs are communicating the message that to integrate equals success while life within an all-Black setting dooms one to failure. Research is also needed to explore the positive elements of programs with all-Black casts and the negative elements that might exist in programs with integrated casts. The portrayal of Afro-Americans on television and the possible effects of their portrayal on the attitudes and perceptions of viewers is an immensely complex problem. This study was designed to shed some light on this problem and to stimulate further research.

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